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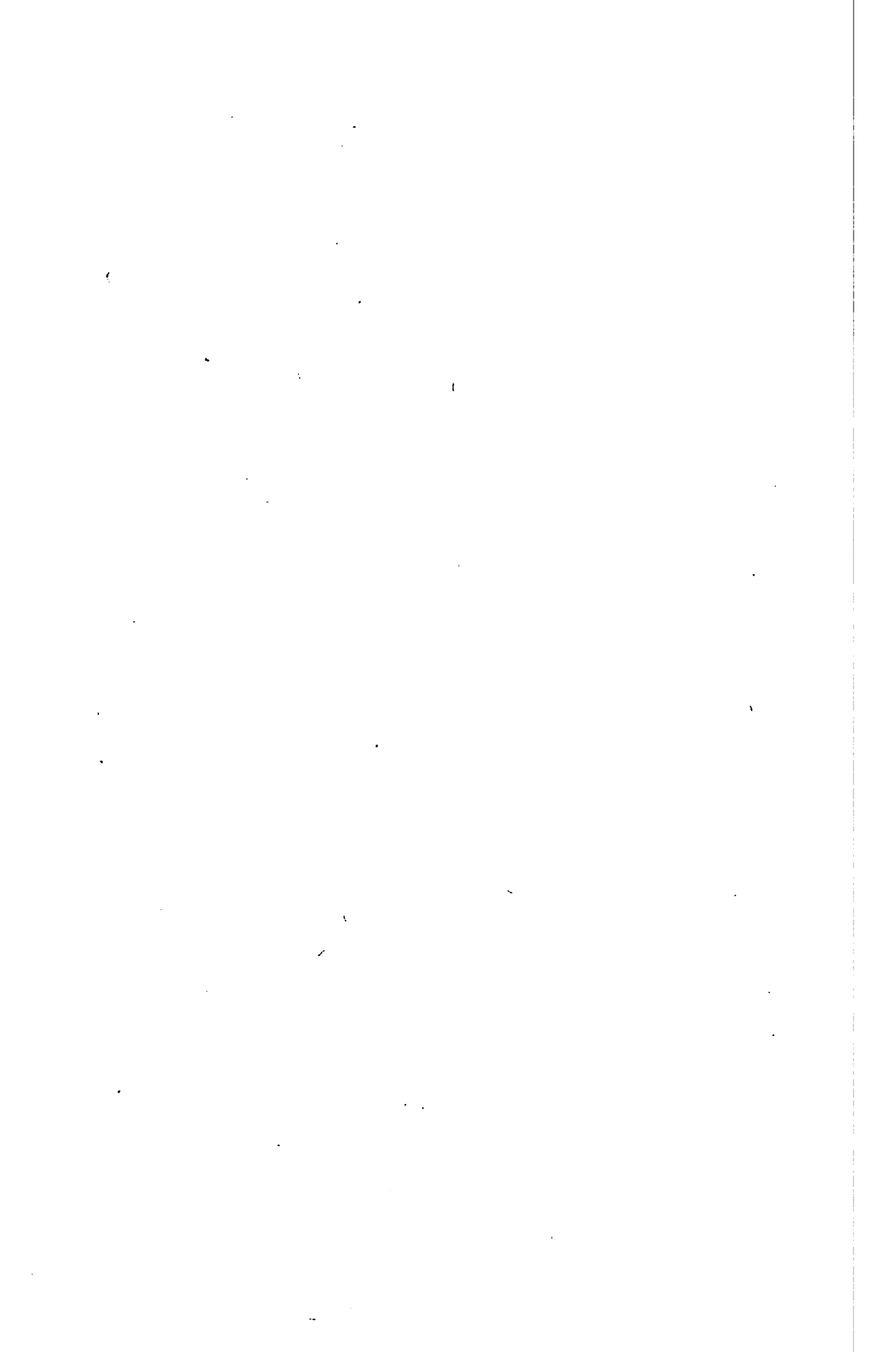
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THE

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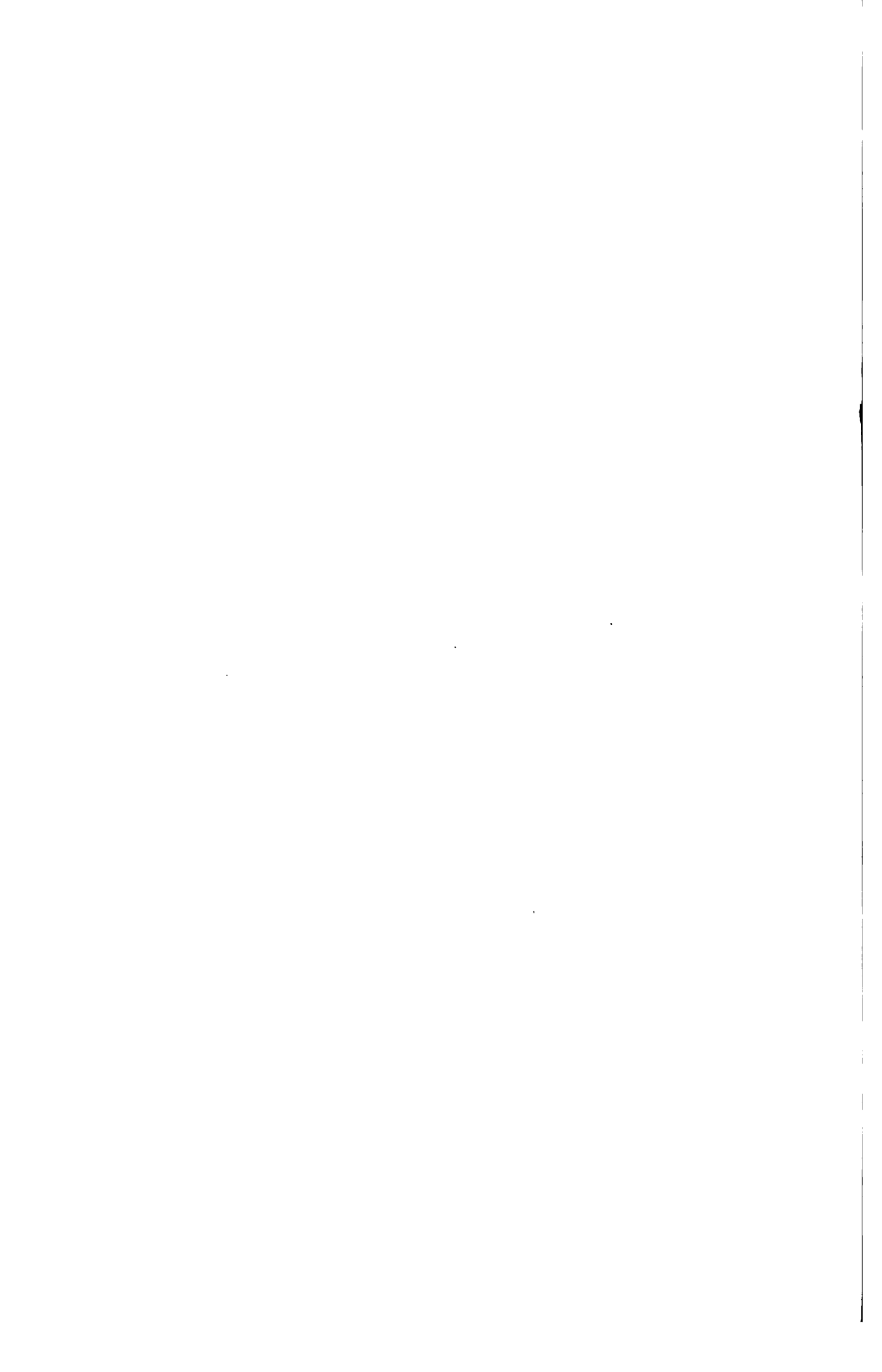
THE TOPSY-TURVYISTS.

*Philip S. P. Conner* BY  
P. S. P. CONNER.

FORWARDED FROM THE UNITED SERVICE FOR FEBRUARY, 1897.

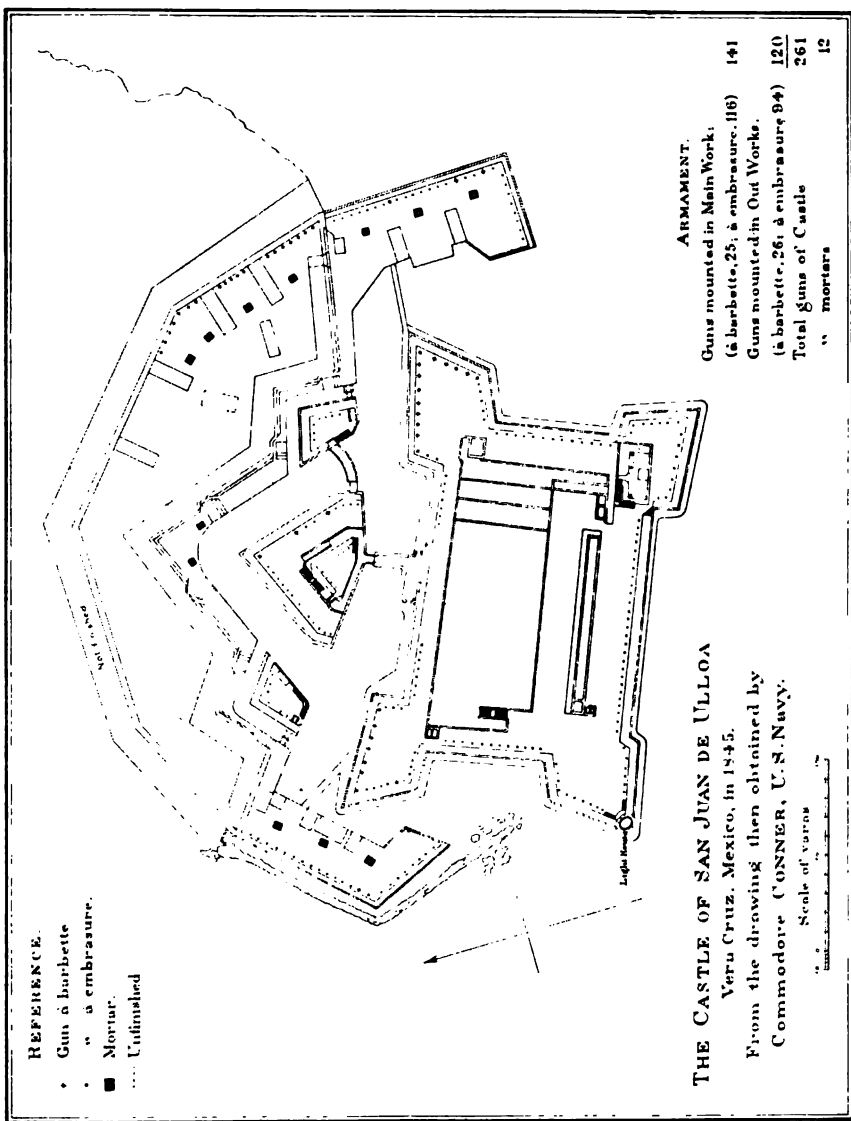
PHILADELPHIA

1897.









The castle of San Juan de Ulloa taken, together with the fortified city of Vera Cruz, by the combined action of the army and navy of the United States, March 29, 1847. The army commanded by General Scott, the naval forces by Commodores Conner and Perry in succession. N. B.—Part marked "Not finished" protected by reef.

THE  
CASTLE OF SAN JUAN DE ULLOA  
AND  
THE TOPSY-TURVYISTS.

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CARELESS reading and hasty generalization are apt to turn things topsy-turvy in the mind, thus presenting a reversed view misleading and false.

A very good illustration of this is found in the assertions and opinions of some of the writers on the Mexican War, regarding the condition of the castle of San Juan de Ulloa and the manner of its reduction by our forces. Thus, for instance, we are told by some that San Juan in 1847 was in no better condition of defense than in 1838, and that half a dozen of the wooden frigates of that day could have taken it by direct bombardment; a painful feeling of failure and disappointment following our omission of this cheap victory. Yes, truly, we should feel humiliated, indeed, were fancies facts; but, since facts will not turn into fancies, in accord with the vagaries of ignorance or prejudice, we really have no whining disappointment to stroke down nor any sobbing regret to coddle.

In 1846, as well known, upon the breaking out of war with Mexico, our fleet—all wooden vessels and but two of them steamers—was before San Juan. Of course popular expectation looked for an immediate bombardment by the ships, but it never came. Not, however, because the officers of the navy avoided such action willingly, but because, as will be shown by me, they were forced so to do by prohibitory circumstances.

Such being the case, and our government fully understanding and appreciating it, the whole matter of a mere naval attack was dropped by the Department and by those naval officers fully aware of the existing conditions, the combined movement of army and navy being decided on, which was carried out, and resulted, as well known, in the speedy capture of both castle and city.

But although the well informed had regretfully resigned a purely naval attack, there were still some persons who—through misconception or blinding zeal having advocated a purely naval attack—could

not bring themselves to its abandonment, but, like the proverbial "man convinced against his will," were "of the same opinion still."

That these malecontents grumbled is not surprising; but in their day these murmurings were known to be but the mere grumblings of the discontented, a class then embracing even Farragut, our future great admiral; for this officer, then but a commander in rank, dazzled by the vision of glory to be gained by the capture of San Juan, and basing his plans for action on the circumstances of the past, was so blinded by his zeal that he took no heed of and refused to acknowledge the changed condition of the time, stubbornly maintaining that the castle had not been strengthened since 1838, and even asserting that the officers then in command—Conner, Perry, and Scott—were all deceived as to the truth when they declared that it had been strengthened. How thoroughly Commander Farragut deceived himself in this matter is shown, I think, by this paper, while his own journal reveals the secret of his self-deception,—namely, mortification and chagrin at being slighted by both his commander-in-chief—Perry—and the Department, and also from having incurred the displeasure of the Secretary of the Navy.<sup>1</sup> (Farragut's journal, quoted in his "Life," by L. Farragut, pp. 158–164.) Fortunately for us, as well as for Farragut, he did not have his over-zealous way, but was preserved for a great and glorious future.

However, time passes on, and the popular historians of the following generations, in the pleasant, easy manner of their kind, skimming the surface of the past and thus collecting its froth, coming across these grumblings, parade them forth as sage opinion and well-founded fact. Thus we are gravely told that San Juan was not greatly strengthened after its capture by the French in 1838, and that during our war it could have been taken by Commodore Conner's squadron. In direct refutation of these vagaries I give the following positive assertions and facts as to the strength of San Juan de Ulloa after 1838, and just before the commencement of our war, and during the same, in 1846 and 1847, with evidence that it was then, indeed, a strong place. But, in advance, let us see what its condition was in 1838 when taken by the French.

Although there were then found one hundred and eighty-seven guns of all kinds within the castle, a large portion were but for land defense, while of the rest—the remainder of the one hundred and eighty-seven—we are left in doubt as to the number mounted. But this is of no consequence, for it matters not, even if that number had reached a thousand; because, instead of sinking the French ships at once by concentrated fire as they came up in range, the Mexicans allowed them to pass on over the points of concentration and into berths

<sup>1</sup> Either this or the alternative, that through inconsecutive quotations Farragut's sayings have been misplaced and confused so that the true meaning is lost.

AND THE TOPSY-TURVYISTS.

8

where but nineteen guns in all could be brought to bear upon them.<sup>1</sup> But even this small number must be reduced by nine, since General Halleck shows in his "Elements of Military Art and Science," p. 190, that it was but equal to ten 24-pounders. Very few guns were dismounted by the French fire; Commodore Conner's informant said not one. (Dispatch of Commodore Conner to the Secretary of the Navy, June 11, 1846.) Those found displaced were either upset by recoil or by the shock from the exploding magazine, which was an *accident* as fortunate for the French as was the omission of the Mexicans to fire upon the approaching ships the moment they came within range; an omission "lucky for us," says the French officer of engineers quoted by Halleck. H. H. Bancroft, in his history of the Pacific state (Mexico), says that at this time the castle had hardly any casemates,<sup>2</sup> that its artillery was of inferior calibre and poorly mounted, while the whole place was in a state of utter neglect, and that General Rincon's late efforts to improve its condition chiefly served to infuse a false confidence in its strength. It was garrisoned with about twelve hundred men. (Vol. viii. p. 192, etc. Bancroft writes from both Mexican and French authorities, giving them in detail.)

The French fleet (consisting of frigates, corvettes, and bomb-ships) mounted one hundred and eighty-four guns at least, the half of which, together with four heavy mortars, was in constant action during the attack; which, moreover, was begun by the French, as stated, who thus were quietly yielded the advantage in time as well as in position. The French fired bombs, Paixhan shells, and solid shot from 32- and 80-pounders; the Mexicans, 9-, 12-, 18-, and 24-pounder shot (but one cannon of the latter calibre), the most of which but stuck in the ships' sides, so poor was the powder. ("Elements," pp. 189-191; Farragut's "Life," pp. 132, 135.)

However, the advantage of the gun ashore is so great over the gun afloat that, even in this instance, some of the ships had to withdraw for a while to refit, the castle managing to hold out for nearly six hours ("Elements," p. 190), in spite of being much shattered by the accidental explosion alluded to. Commander Farragut, seeing the damage thus done, and being under the impression that the French fired mostly Paixhan shells, attributed it chiefly to them, receiving and giving the idea that two hundred shot and shell were poured into the fort per minute. (Farragut's "Life," p. 130.) This would be at the rate of twelve thousand per hour, and, as it is well known that the bombardment lasted at least five hours ("Elements," p. 190), this would give a total of sixty thousand, a quantity seemingly sufficient to warrant

<sup>1</sup> There is a special reason for this slackness, to wit: the Mexican government was so averse to the war that it gave positive orders not to fire a shot until fired upon by the French.

<sup>2</sup> This is corroborated by a remark of Commander Farragut. See "Life" of Farragut, by Farragut, p. 134, second paragraph, second line.

Farragut's supposition,—viz., that the Paixhan shells knocked down the castle's walls. But the French officer of engineers quoted by Halleck ("Elements," p. 190) puts the total number of shot and shell at but eight thousand two hundred and fifty, while from Young's "History of Mexico" we get the same number, together with a particular statement thereof thus specified: Bomb-shells, three hundred and two; solid shot, seven thousand seven hundred and seventy-one; Paixhan shells, one hundred and seventy-seven (Young, p. 272, etc.),—that is, a quantity of Paixhans not one-forty-seventh part of the whole number of projectiles thrown.

Now, it is possible that the walls of a fort might be breached by the discharge of a hundred and seventy-seven Paixhan shells directed against its face, at moderate range, striking directly and within a limited circle of concentration, provided, as Commodore Sicard, chief of the Bureau of Ordnance, sagaciously remarks in a letter to me, the shells have enough penetrative and explosive force; but such a result is not possible when those shells are fired at long range, at different times, and scattered in space, and such must have been the character of the discharge of the hundred and seventy-seven under consideration, for Farragut himself says, "I do not think the ships were near enough to damage it [San Juan de Ulloa] materially." (P. 129, Farragut's journal, as above.) Hence, while some of the cracks seen by Farragut were doubtless made by the Paixhans, the great damage to the fort was caused by the explosion of its magazine,—indeed, two blew up,—as at first asserted by Farragut (p. 129, journal) and confirmed by the French authorities quoted by Halleck, who, moreover, finds that but slight injury was done by the French fire (pp. 190, 191, "Elements"), thus corroborating Farragut's assertion to the same effect, as well as the similar declaration of Commodore Conner's informant. As for these explosions, so fatal to the Mexicans, whether they occurred through the carelessness of the garrison or from a lucky French shell, they were, in either case, but accidents, the magazines which caused them being hidden, and therefore invisible to direct aim, and but to be reached by chance. (See the references noted, also Young's "History," p. 271, and Farragut's account in his "Life," mentioned p. 128 *et seq.* and p. 156 *et seq.*)

But General Halleck is by no means alone in his remarks and conclusions as regards the actual uselessness of the French ship-fire upon San Juan in 1838. On the same subject and to the same end thus speaks General Totten in his report on our coast defenses. (House Document No. 206, Twenty-sixth Congress, first session, p. 25, vol. vi., labelled "Executive Document," A.D. 1839-40.)

That high authority says that the effect of Paixhans on the castle was greatly exaggerated, because for breaching stone walls they were of no use, since they exploded and broke to pieces before deep penetra-

tion. This he proved by actual test. According to Totten, the real damage done to the castle and the cause of its surrender came not directly by the French fire, but from an inherent cause,—to wit, self-destruction. The castle blew itself up. Its own magazines exploding destroyed it, and these explosions were the result of Mexican ignorance or carelessness,—either ignorance in putting powder in weak magazines, whereby a chance French shell entered, or from carelessness in handling the powder and so exploding it prematurely. The general further declared that had the Mexicans removed all of the powder from the fort, and, not firing a single shot, remained quiet until the French had expended all of their ammunition upon the work, that it would have been as defensible then as it was before the bombardment, for *that* could not have materially injured it, while, being empty of powder, it could not blow up. But the fear of the remaining magazines (five or six) going off in the same way as the first two (whereby sixty men were buried under one wall) forced the surrender.

It is needless to say that the weak magazines were made strong by the year 1846 (for, as shown, since months of labor were expended on the castle in 1845, if these vital points were neglected, on what were the time and treasure spent?), and since the shell-stone of the sea-front was *not* faced with granite, the said original material was *not* found to be dangerously penetrable to Paixhan shells; the serious rents in it being caused not by them, but by the explosions. However, the possibility of Paixhans being effective against conchite may account for Commodore Conner naming Paixhan-gun armed ships (*together with those armed with solid-shot guns and mortars*) as fit ones to take part in the bombardment.

But even supposing the condition of the castle in 1846 to be as Farragut asserted, it is not to be presumed for a moment that the circumstances of the attack would have been the same then as in 1838; on the contrary, instead of permitting our ships to quietly sail into safe berths out of reach of the castle's guns, whole tiers of cannon would have opened upon them the moment they came within range. This difference of circumstance should in itself have been fatal.

So much for the condition of the castle in 1838, as drawn, in part, from Admiral Farragut's own statements; now let us see what its condition was just before our war, and during it in 1846. Thus, to begin, Semmes in his "Service Afloat and Ashore," p. 106, tells us that Santa Anna, regarding Vera Cruz as the key to Mexico, and anticipating war with us, repaired the castle in advance of hostilities; he then mentions its force (during the war) in combination with the supporting forts on the mainland, and the armament on the walls of the city, as amounting to about four hundred pieces of ordnance, many of them heavy pieces, just cast in the newest form, from our own foundries. Frost, in his "History of Mexico" (p. 468, edition of 1882), says, "The

walls [of San Juan] are about five yards in thickness, constructed of a species of soft coral and faced on the exterior [fronting Vera Cruz] with hard stone. It is supplied with water by seven cisterns, which will hold more than a thousand cubic feet of water. An officer of the American army describes its strength at the time of the attack (1847) in the following language: 'There are at present mounted nearly three hundred cannon, and wherever it has been possible to train a gun upon the channel approach it is planted; so that a fleet moving up to the attack must be exposed to the concentrated fire of seventy cannon over the distance of two miles before it can get into position to return a shot.'

"The castle of San Juan is about three-eighths of a mile from the city [of Vera Cruz], and is supported by a water battery at the northwest angle of the town of fifty 32- and 42-pounder guns, all of which would bear upon a squadron passing up from the moment it arrived within range until within musket-shot."

"The garrison at this time is composed of two thousand men. In the event of an attack, they could, with the most perfect safety, retire within the casemates (which are as impervious to shot as the sides of Mount Orizaba) until the ammunition of the assailing force was expended, when they would return to their guns and sweep the waters with the most terrific effect." General Scott, in his "Autobiography," writes, "The city of Vera Cruz, and its castle, San Juan de Ulloa, were both strongly garrisoned. . . . The walls and forts of Vera Cruz, in 1847, were in good condition. Subsequent to its capture by the French under Admiral Baudin and Prince de Joinville, in 1838, the castle had been greatly extended,—almost rebuilt, and its armament about doubled. . . . When we approached it, in 1847, the castle had the capacity to sink the entire American navy." (General Scott's "Autobiography," pp. 421, 422, vol. xi.)

I will now turn to Commodore Conner's official dispatches and letters. On July 27, 1845, he tells the Secretary of the Navy that the castle is now much more strongly defended than when attacked by the French in 1838; but that, if the occasion arose, he would do the best he could against it with the force he had. At this time there was no "occasion," we being at peace with Mexico. Two months later he wrote, that, in consequence of the additions made to the fortress, his squadron would require considerable reinforcement if, in the event of war, the castle were to be attacked. That, in its then condition, it should not be attempted with a less force than three frigates of the first class, two ships of the line, two bomb-vessels with 13-inch mortars, and such vessels of his present squadron as were fit; for, adds he, "The honor of our arms demands that the attack should be in force at least sufficient to render success probable." Time passed on, the Mexicans continuing to add to the castle's strength until, on the 11th of September, he had to report that the old armament of San Juan

had been principally replaced by new of heavier calibre. The guns mounted numbered two hundred, or thereabout, with twelve mortars in addition,<sup>1</sup>—his own force then being as follows: frigate "Poto-

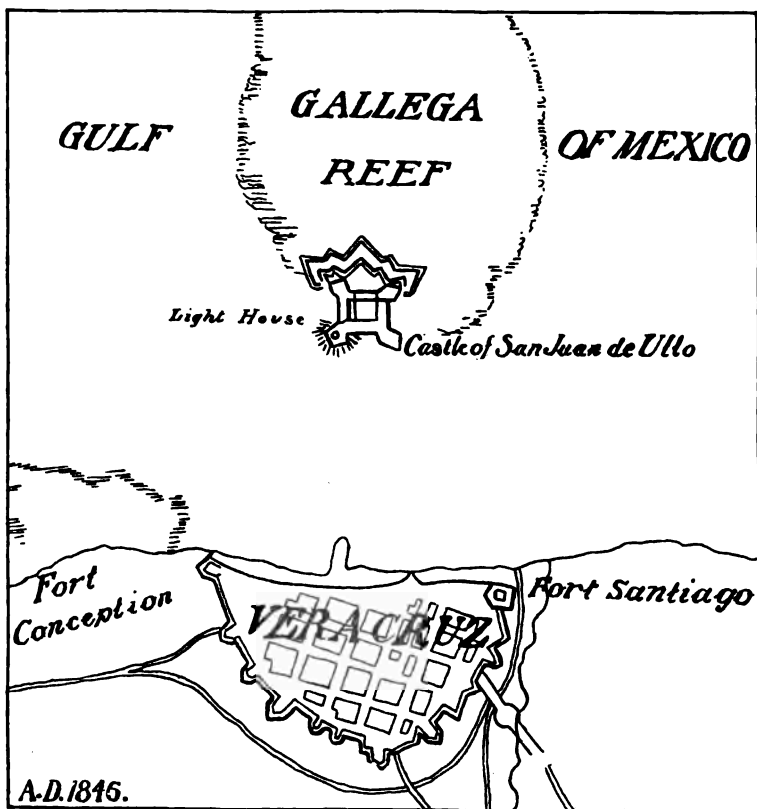
<sup>1</sup> See plan of San Juan de Ulloa in 1845, on page 116. Early in the autumn of 1845 Commodore Conner, being detained at Pensacola in consequence of a leak in his flag-ship, the "Potomac," dispatched Captain McCluney in the "John Adams" to Vera Cruz, in quest of information. He was followed by Lieutenant James S. Biddle under similar orders. McCluney reported, on the authority of our consul at Vera Cruz, Mr. Dimond, that the castle was "pretty well armed and manned;" Biddle, that it then had about one hundred and twenty guns mounted, with thirty more in the sea-front of the city, which numbers were constantly being added to, while by the "Saratoga," direct from Vera Cruz, the commodore received the accompanying plans of the castle, showing two hundred and sixty-one guns and twelve mortars mounted. Such was the reported armament of San Juan de Ulloa in the fall of 1845, a report obtained by Commodore Conner from a confidential source, in which he had reason to have confidence, and which he states was verified in part by his own observation, and which, moreover, is corroborated by the official returns of our army officers after the capture of the city and castle, in March, 1847, since over four hundred pieces of ordnance are therein stated as found in Vera Cruz and San Juan de Ulloa. (Commodore Conner to Secretary Bancroft, September 3-11, 1845,—plan forwarded by letter;) General Scott, General Orders, March 30, 1847, p. 239, vol. ii., Executive Document for 1847-48; corroboration of same, Scott to Secretary of War, April 5, 1847, Executive Document, vol. vii. p. 911, A.D. 1847-48.) However, since the accuracy of these returns, although official, has been questioned (although by no means disproved), I give about two hundred guns as the castle's armament, this agreeing with Commodore Conner's opinion as expressed in a letter, written off Vera Cruz, to the Secretary of the Navy on the 8d of May, 1846, together with the twelve mortars already mentioned, while fifty or more guns, in addition, commanded the approaches for ships to the castle between it and Vera Cruz, these guns being mounted on the sea-wall of the city and in the two forts at its extreme easterly and westerly ends (Santiago and Concepcion), thus affording a cross-fire. (See plan of Vera Cruz and San Juan de Ulloa on the following page.)

A fact which may account for some writers underestimating the armament of San Juan is that it underwent a transformation upon the threatening of our war, new guns being added to the old, the Mexican record of the mounting of which may have been mistaken for the castle's total number, whereas it was but an addition. Another reason which accounts for the smaller number of guns attributed by some to the castle and Vera Cruz is the likelihood of the truth of the assertion that, *after* it was certain that those places would not be attacked by direct bombardment from a fleet, and that, hence, it was evident that the brunt of the battle would be shifted to the route between Vera Cruz and the City of Mexico, many of the guns on the said coast defenses were dismounted preparatory to removal (some being removed) and transportation to the forts and batteries defending the road to the capital. Hence, while San Juan alone had two hundred and sixty-one cannon and twelve mortars mounted in 1845 and 1846,—when the Mexicans thought a fleet attack possible,—that number may have been reduced by the spring of 1847, when all danger from that particular form of assault was known to be over by reason of the plainly assured intention of the United States to outflank the fortress, gain its rear, and rush upon the capital. But, after all, the actual power of a fortress does not consist in the mere number of its guns, but in their size, quality, and position, together with force sufficient to man them, and hence, when we find that according to the smallest estimate of such power possessed by San Juan de Ulloa at the time of our attack, as made by a Mexican, it embraced a force of at least one hundred and twenty-three pieces of mounted ordnance, consisting of 24-, 42-, and 68-pounder



mac," 50 guns; sloop "Saratoga,"<sup>1</sup> 24; sloop "Falmouth," 24; sloop "St. Mary's," 24; sloop "John Adams," 24; side-wheel steamer "Mississippi," 10; steam propeller "Princeton," 9; brig "Porpoise,"

cannon with 84-pounder mortars, with a garrison of over a thousand men, we may conclude that the castle was anything but a weak place, for here in this estimate of its force, given by a Mexican excusing and apologizing for his nation's defeat, and, consequently, put as low as possible, we have proof of a force equivalent to over



SAN JUAN DE ULLOA AND VERA CRUZ.

Plan showing the castle, with its supporting forts, Conception and Santiago, and the walled and fortified city of Vera Cruz lying about half a mile from it, on the main land.

six hundred guns of equal calibre afloat. (Roa Bárcena, "Recuerdos," p. 158, as quoted by H. H. Bancroft in his history, "Mexico," vol. viii. p. 441.)

Had the fire of this Mexican force been directed against wooden ships, instead of sand-bag batteries situated on land, its demolishing effect would have been fatal; for ships, if knocked to pieces, as were the batteries, cannot at once be put together again, as were the latter, by simply piling up fresh bags of sand, as did our men at the siege. (See Captain Aulick to Commodore Perry, March 25; Captain Mayo to latter, March 26; Captain Breese to Perry, March 28, 1847, Executive Document No. 1, A.D. 1848, pp. 1181, 1183, 1188.)

<sup>1</sup> But temporarily attached, as she belonged to our Brazilian squadron. See Naval Register.

12; brig "Lawrence," 12; brig "Somers," 12; a fleet of ten sail mounting two hundred and one guns, of which number not half were fitted either by weight or shape to make any serious impression upon the walls of a fortress, but well adapted for the purpose for which they were intended,—viz., the close action of ship to ship. (Commodore Conner to Secretary of Navy, in letters of August and September, 1845.)

And now a period of eight months has elapsed and the war has broken out. In this interval the Mexicans had continued to add new works and extra guns to both city and castle until the two places together formed a veritable fortress armed with three hundred pieces of ordnance, the most, if not all, of new form and large calibre,—e.g., 8- and 10-inch Paixhans (shell-guns), American and English 42- and 68-pounders, and 13-inch mortars. The garrison consisted of four thousand men. An Italian engineer with a body of laborers, in addition to the regular garrison, had repaired and in part reconstructed the works, while an English artilleryman had charge of the batteries.<sup>1</sup>

Under these circumstances of increased strength, Commodore Conner now advised his government that to attempt to capture the place by a mere naval attack, the force he mentioned as adequate on the 3d of September, 1845, should be increased to one of the following power,—viz., five ships-of-the-line, four bomb-vessels, three frigates, and the three sloops already attached to his squadron, thus making a fleet of fifteen sail mounting six hundred and forty-six guns. (Commodore Conner to Secretary of Navy, June 11, 1846.)

Commodore Conner was anxious for the navy to take the castle and city; to that end he gave the matter much attention, using every exertion in obtaining all necessary information thereto. His wife, in her

<sup>1</sup> Dispatches and Autobiography of General Scott, etc.; Commodore Conner's dispatches and manuscript notes of information received by him at the time regarding San Juan; Lieutenant James S. Biddle's letter, published in *The National Intelligence*, October 1, 1845, in which he says, "Six hundred soldiers, with a gang of sixty workmen in addition, are still employed in mounting artillery in the castle."

N.B.—Mr. Biddle informed me, in a conversation with him, that Admiral Farragut was mistaken in supposing that San Juan de Ulloa had not been strengthened since the French took it in 1838, for he himself (Biddle) not only saw its restoration going on when he was there, in September, 1845, but also met the engineer in charge of this work,—an Italian, as he thinks. This officer was also repairing the castle's two supporting forts on the mainland, Conception and Santiago, and Lieutenant Biddle could have got models of them if he had chosen; but he thought one of the castle enough. This he bought from the engineer officer mentioned and sent it to Washington, where it was duly received. (Mr. Biddle's letter and inclosure of April 26, 1890, to me, and still in my possession.)

Furthermore, the work of reparation did not stop in 1845, but was carried on, as the following extract from a letter to Commodore Conner by Commander Jos. R. Jarvis, of the "Falmouth," dated "off Vera Cruz, May 9, 1846," shows: "Since you left (Commodore Conner had gone to the support of General Taylor) nothing new has transpired, the Mexicans continue working upon the outworks of the castle, and also on the works about the town."

journal, complains of the degree to which he is engrossed by the subject. The result of his investigation and consideration of the matter was the above estimate. Long before this he had informed his government that the capture of the castle by a fleet greatly depended upon the time of its attack, and now, the place growing so rapidly in strength and force, that along with this estimate he was constrained to say that, if the castle was garrisoned by experienced officers and men, it could give defiance to any naval force sent against it; nevertheless, if the government ordered it, he would attack with any force they thought adequate, as before indicated.

This ended the correspondence regarding the attack upon Vera Cruz and San Juan de Ulloa, so far as a purely naval one was concerned, not only because of Commodore Conner's opinion, supported as it was by the old and experienced officers of the navy,<sup>1</sup> but because the Department well knew and declared the fleet in the Gulf to be inadequate, and, moreover, because the government was now well aware (as Commodore Conner had long been) that this fortress, impregnable from the sea, was an *easy* prey to a land attack by a force in its rear,<sup>2</sup> and since the place was not an open town, but a walled and fortified one, it was a legitimate subject for attack in any manner, and at its weakest point. Hence under these circumstances a mere naval attack upon its

<sup>1</sup> Thus Commodore Charles Morris (that "Mentor" of our old navy, and who, by the by, was at this time the chief of the Bureau of Construction, Equipment, and Repair) states that if San Juan de Ulloa is to be attacked by the navy, it should be done by all the ships-of-the-line afloat; bomb-vessels, frigates, etc., in addition. (Morris to Conner, May 28, 1846.) While Commodore Charles Stewart ("Old Ironsides"), on being approached by the government on the subject of the castle's attack, is reported to have replied that if the government ordered him to attack the castle on *their* responsibility he would certainly do so; but not if *he* was to be held fully responsible for the result.

<sup>2</sup> While Vera Cruz was impregnable from its sea front, it was so weak in the rear, that if the government had, in the fall of 1846, added a landing force of fifteen hundred men to the squadron, Commodore Conner would have taken the city and castle of San Juan de Ulloa without the aid of the army; but the opportunity, so great for the republic, not to mention what it would have been to the navy, passed unnoticed, and the prize was left to dangle at the convenience of the army, whose luck, if possible, equaled its valor.

I add Commodore Conner's words: "Considering the number of the present garrison in the town (Vera Cruz), which probably does not exceed eighteen hundred or two thousand men, and the probability of its not being reinforced for some time, if at all, even when threatened with an attack, as the government does not possess the means,—the small stock of provision on hand, and the great difficulty of obtaining a supply,—I am led to believe that a force of two thousand men, or perhaps fifteen hundred, besides all the force of the squadron that could be spared, would be sufficient to render its capture certain. Once in our possession, a few ships anchored in the harbor, and a few men thrown into the castle, having previously destroyed all the artillery on the side of the city [commanding the castle], would hold both places, in perfect security, for any length of time." (Commodore Conner to the Secretary of the Navy, October 7, 1846.)

strongest side, that of San Juan de Ulloa, even if successful, would, after all, have been a blunder; if unsuccessful, a disgrace.

Through the secret correspondence, opened and maintained by Commodore Conner, it was learned that, although the castle was strong and well armed, it was not fully provisioned, but drew temporary supplies from the city, which, in turn, was served from the country; hence, if the city were cut off from the latter by an army on the land side, and by the fleet on its sea side, both city and castle would fall with the failure of supplies; a result which would soon follow, the Mexicans having no relieving force, either of men or ships to prevent it.<sup>1</sup>

This fact being fully ascertained,—viz., that the castle did depend upon the city, and that the latter could be taken easily, while the former, if taken at all, would require a great outlay of treasure, ships, and, probably, human life, decided the government. The naval attack, never seriously entertained, was completely laid aside, and the combined movement, of army and navy, was ordered and successfully carried out by General Scott for the army and Commodore Conner for the navy, followed by Commodore Perry.

And now, after all, let us suppose that the number of guns found in Vera Cruz and San Juan de Ulloa, as stated by our official army returns (four hundred) is an over-estimate by one hundred guns, as some historians assert, or, if you please, by one-half, there is still left the number of two hundred.

Now, down to this period and, indeed, later, according to so good an authority as our own Admiral Du Pont, in the age of wooden ships and smooth-bore guns, the most successful attempt against forts was at Algiers, under Lord Exmouth, in 1816. In this instance, although the fortifications were armed with a thousand guns, but about two hundred of them were actively opposed to the fleet, which mounted also about a thousand cannon. The result was that, although the English were granted redress, the forts were not even silenced, the fleet had to haul off, and it was admitted by the admiral that he could not have continued the action. ("Report on the National Defenses, by Commodore S. F. Du Pont, U.S.N., p. 12, Washington, printed by Gideon & Co., 1852.") As for Acre, in 1840, it was besieged *by land* as well as by sea, and it succumbed only after the *accidental* explosion of its magazine.

<sup>1</sup> It is from ignorance of these facts that some writers assert that the castle did not depend on the city.

It was thought by some that the castle might be surprised and carried by escalade; perhaps not an impossible feat, provided, considering the limited force available from the squadron, the attempt were made when the garrison was at a minimum or in revolt, and *emeutes* were not unknown to its soldiers; but the thing of the first importance was to know *in time* when to strike; but all preknowledge was made impossible to Commodore Conner by the gallant but mistaken burning of the "Creole," for with her destruction as a supposed blockade-runner ended the secret information obtained by Commodore Conner from Vera Cruz.

Searched to the bottom, this affair (Acre), pronounced by "the highest military authority in England"<sup>1</sup> to be "one of the greatest achievements of modern times," proves to have been in essence and virtually, according to Du Pont, the action of *five hundred* guns afloat against *five* on shore; for but that number alone, out of all the enemy possessed, was well served. (Ibid., p. 13.) The same "highest authority" furthermore warned his countrymen not to expect such results commonly, no matter how well commanded were their fleets or how gallant their seamen, for, continued he, in substance, ships are incapable of generally engaging stone walls with success, to which sentiment may be added the positive declaration of Du Pont, that no ship or ships could lie under a fort, at least an American fort, equipped with hot-shot furnaces and shell-guns (Ibid., pp. 12 and 13), both of which appliances, by the by, were possessed by San Juan de Ulloa during the term of our war.

Now, in those days before the general use of steamers, the knowledge of iron-clads and rifled cannon, one gun on shore was considered equal to five afloat,—a proportion vouched for by our Admiral Porter, an officer familiar with the old as well as the new methods and requirements of naval warfare.<sup>2</sup> Such was the proportion at Algiers, and such we may grant to Acre, although more likely ten to one in the latter case,—if not, indeed, a hundred to one, on the side of the British; see above.

And so, settling on five to one as the proportion giving equality to fort and ship, and reducing—in imagination—the armament of San Juan de Ulloa and its supporting forts on the mainland to two hundred guns, it requires a fleet of one thousand guns to reach simple equality. Now, the squadron under Commodore Conner never had three hundred guns, and the greater part of what it had was unfit for the bombardment of a fort. Moreover, to concentrate this totally inadequate force before San Juan de Ulloa would have necessitated the raising of the blockade from off the whole Gulf coast, because its vessels, intended for that blockade, were therein distributed, some of them hundreds of miles apart, thus showing the idea of an off-hand attack from such a force irrational if not absurd; while it is also very evident that, when Commodore Conner advised his government that if the castle was to be attacked by ships alone it would be necessary to considerably increase the Gulf fleet, he contemplated the maintenance of the blockade of the coast during the progress of the bombardment of the castle, and hence it was that he asked for a fleet of some four hundred guns in addition to what he already had, thus making a total of six or

<sup>1</sup> The Duke of Wellington. General Halleck in his "Elements," before alluded to, gives a searching, critical account of the bombardments I mention, in which I find his conclusions agree with mine, and are corroborated by the instances cited by him from the Russian war of 1854.

<sup>2</sup> "The Naval History of the Civil War," p. 45.

seven hundred. Undoubtedly this was the proper course, and unquestionably his estimate was not excessive for this double object; for we have seen that it required five guns afloat to equal one on shore, and here we have barely six hundred and fifty guns set against at least two hundred,—a proportion much below equality, so far as the guns afloat were concerned.

And now let us see how, after the fall of San Juan de Ulloa and Vera Cruz, Commodore Conner's prior estimate of that fortress's strength was proved correct by the undeniable evidence of sight and touch—of fact—displayed to all. Upon its occupation by our forces, in the spring of 1847, it was found to be a true fortress,—that is, not a single fort, but a number of forts all either joined together by a chain of works or, if not, standing within supporting distance of each other. In this fortress were found over four hundred pieces of ordnance, including very heavy cannon,—Paixhans and mortars; a garrison of five thousand men, with a like number of stands of arms and a large quantity of ordnance stores. (General Scott's General Orders, No. 80, March 30, 1847, Executive Documents for 1847-48, vol. ii. p. 239; dispatch to Secretary of War, April 5, 1847, Executive Documents for A.D. 1847-48, vol. vii. p. 911.) I am aware and already have mentioned that Mexican writers, together with some of our own following them, assert that these figures exceed the actual numbers by fully a hundred in the matter of guns and a thousand in that of men; but even supposing this to be true, there would still remain three hundred guns and four thousand men, and certainly, with that or even a less force, the place could not be called weak and poorly garrisoned. Passing on from these official reports of General Scott, let us turn to the evidence of the flag lieutenant, Mr. James S. Biddle.

This officer states that he visited San Juan de Ulloa on the day of its surrender, and that he "found it a work of immense massiveness, exceeding by very much anything I had imagined. I have seen the famous fortifications at the Havana, but these are on a much grander scale."<sup>1</sup> Mr. Biddle further informed me, in conversation, that he saw no sign of weakness in the castle. The guns were numerous, large, and well mounted. To this may be added the answer of the British navy officers to Commodore Perry's question, when *within* the castle, that, "If garrisoned with a thousand Americans or Englishmen, it could defy the fleets of the world," and also Commodore Perry's declaration to the Secretary of the Navy on April 11, 1847, that "The attack on the city from the land side was managed with great judgment and skill; indeed, I never entertained or expressed any other opinion than that it should be made from the rear by breaching and assault." (Executive Documents, No. 1, 30th Cong., 2d sess., p. 1191.)

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Mr. Biddle to me of January 25, 1884, quoting from one written by him to Mrs. Biddle after visiting the castle upon its surrender, on March 29, 1847.

And now, after all this, how are we to account for the assertion that Admiral Farragut said the castle could be taken by Commodore Conner's force? How, indeed, if it were true? But, indeed, there is no proof that Farragut ever said so. What he did say is, that the castle could hardly be taken at all by the ordinary ship-artillery of that day, but that it could be taken by horizontal shell-fire from Paixhan guns,<sup>1</sup> an assertion in unison with Commodore Conner's expressed opinion,—viz., that the guns of the "Potomac" and "Mississippi" were of the proper kind to use against the castle;<sup>1</sup> these guns were solid-shot 32's and 8- and 10-inch Paixhan shell-guns.<sup>2</sup>

But there still remains Farragut's assertion that he could take the castle with the "Pennsylvania," of one hundred and twenty guns, and two sloops like the "Saratoga," each mounting twenty-four guns, one hundred and sixty-eight in all. How can we account for this assertion, after knowing the full truth in regard to the condition of San Juan and Vera Cruz, as shown in this paper? How, I say, with such knowledge to us, can we conceive of Farragut entertaining such an idea? The reason is simple and easily explained. It was not necessarily, as the Navy Department came near thinking, because Farragut had become monomaniacal upon the subject,<sup>3</sup> but simply because, being but a junior officer—commander—at that time and without weight of responsibility or full knowledge of the state of the castle as it then was, he based his calculations on conditions and actions which he had known and seen, but which had passed away in an interval of nine years. Hence it was that he took a narrow view of the whole matter and based his method on the supposition that the castle was not changed since 1838 and that the Mexicans were timid and inefficient. Farragut was not yet the great commander-in-chief, with his native courage and daring tempered and elevated into lofty military virtues, well balanced by experience and the weight of responsibility, but merely the junior captain, aflame with daring and eager for fame.

And so, in conclusion, I will add that I think it has been shown that Conner, Perry, and Scott were not mistaken in their estimate of the strength and power of San Juan de Ulloa at the time of our war,—the result of the siege, although adverse to the Mexicans, proving them to be brave men, and justifying the basis on which Commodore Conner rested his estimates for attack,—namely, the belief that the place was strong from the sea and the supposition that it would certainly be creditably defended, making its capture by mere naval bombardment

<sup>1</sup> Farragut's "Life of Farragut," pp. 180, 183, 184, 185. On the last two pages the admiral says that the castle could have been knocked to pieces by the horizontal shell-fire of the French, but that "they might have bombarded with the bomb-vessels for a month without success."

<sup>2</sup> Commodore Conner to Secretary of the Navy Bancroft, September 8, 1845.

<sup>3</sup> Farragut's "Life of Farragut," p. 157.

no light matter, while if well and skillfully defended, as it might be, considering the presence of trained European engineer and artillery officers within its walls, as well as native commanders of repute, it could not be taken by wooden ships, being thus impregnable; and hence, since no effort was made in time to put into effect Commodore Conner's suggestion that the squadron should be furnished with a landing *brigade* sufficiently strong to surround the city on its landward side, while the fleet did the same to it and the castle seaward, thus compelling a quick surrender of both by complete, encircling blockade (for supplies were short and no relieving force at hand), thus giving to the navy a triumph which justly should have been its alone; hence I say that since the above plan was not acted on, the one that was carried out—viz., the *combined* action of the army and the navy—was the best one possible; indeed, the only one left practicable. How well, harmoniously, and successfully both services acted in that movement is known to all.









THE  
CASTLE OF SAN JUAN DE ULLOA  
AND  
THE TOPSY-TURVYISTS.

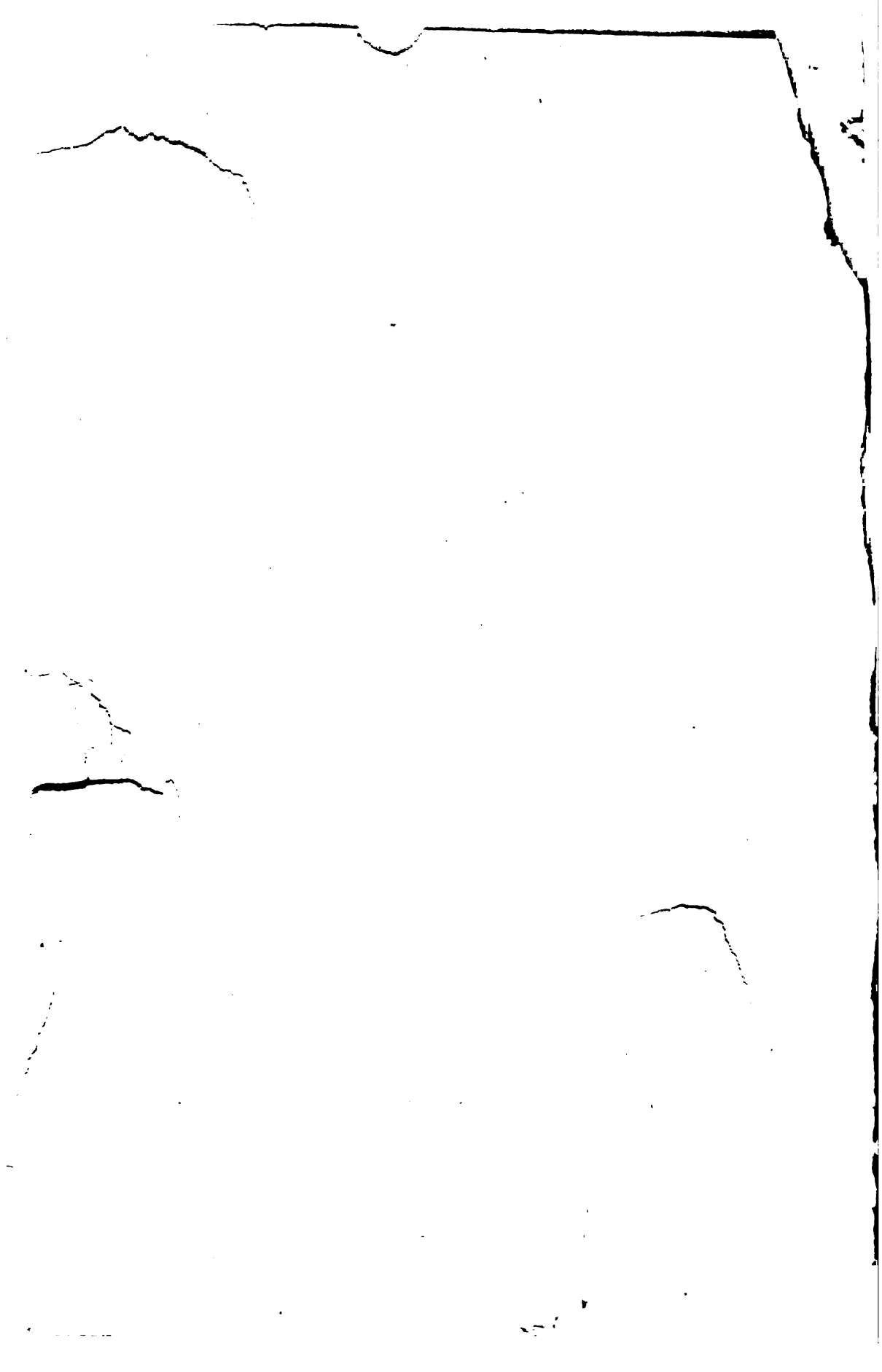
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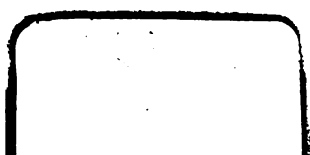
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